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ABSTRACT

Bibliotherapy is a powerful tool for helping children cope with direct and indirect death experiences. Through the process of bibliotherapy, readers may identify with others whose experiences are similar, feel emotional release as a result of this identification, and gain insights into their own experiences. For this process to be helpful, it is crucial that any book selected to facilitate the process be carefully evaluated to determine whether its content will contribute to children's immediate intellectual, emotional, and social needs, thereby helping children develop independence and strength when coping with death experiences. (Five books are analyzed in terms of the presented criteria.) (RL)

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CHILDREN AND DEATH: Coping Models in Literature

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The therapeutic use of books has occurred in a variety of settings (Menninger, 1936; Russell and Schrodes, 1950; and Moses and Zaccaria, 1969) and for a variety of purposes (Schrodes, 1955; Newton, 1969; Schiltheis, 1972; and Corman, 1975). The terminology most often used when describing this use of books is bibliotherapy which is generally conceived as a three-part process: identification, catharsis, and insight.

Identification is the reader's attribution to himself/herself, consciously or unconsciously, the characteristics of another person or group within a story.

Catharsis is the reader's feeling of emotional release as a result of the identification. The reader shares the character's motivations and conflicts and experiences, vicariously, the character's emotions. As the reader puts himself/herself in the place of others, he/she comes to understand not only the needs and aspirations of the characters but of himself/herself as well. The story provides a release from tension.

Insight is the reader's seeing into a situation or himself/herself. It results from see oneself in the behavior of the characters in a story, thus achieving insight into one's own feelings, motivations, needs.

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This is the process of bibliotherapy. It is the content of a book which facilitates such a process. The therapeutic use of books with children who have been exposed to death either directly (the death of an animal or person known to the child) or indirectly (the death of an animal or person experienced vicariously through media or hearsay) should be prefaced by consideration of whether or not the book content provides the young reader with a model which contributes to his/her intellectual, emotional, and social needs and resources:

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

Do the characters provide a model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an age-appropriate manner?

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

Do the characters provide a model of children being "o.k." to feel as they do about death; of children being taken care of after a death exposure (direct or indirect)?

3. Social Needs and Resources

Do the characters provide a model of death being a shared experience?

These questions are a criteria which must be used to evaluate any book selected to help a child cope with a death exposure. It cannot be assumed by the adult that any book dealing with children and death will be potentially helpful to a child.

Only a book in which the characters provide adequate coping models related to a child's intellectual, emotional, and social needs and resources is potentially helpful. A children's book about death should provide adequate models related to each need and resource area (intellectual, emotional, and social). If one area is omitted from a story, it, perhaps, can be compensated for by significant others in the young reader's life; if one or more areas is dealt with inaccurately or inappropriately, however, the book, in part or in total, should not be used.

Let us examine several books which have been recommended for use with children who have been exposed to death. These books have been taken from lists (Marshall and Marshall, 1971; Ross, 1972; Carr, 1973; Morris, 1974; Delisle and Woods, 1976; Prouty, 1976; Romero, 1976; Sadker and Sadker, 1977) which have been compiled to inform adults as to what is available to help children cope with death. Each book will be examined using the criteria questions listed previously.

Nana Upstairs and Nana Downstairs
Tomie dePaola
G. P. Putnam's Sons
New York, 1973
Suggested Age Range: 4-6 years

This is the story of four year old Tommy who visits with his grandmother, Nana Downstairs, and his great-grandmother, Nana Upstairs. One day Tommy arrives only to be told that Nana Upstairs has died. The story deals with Tommy's reaction to the death.

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an age-appropriate manner. Tommy's reaction to the news of his great-grandmother's death is accurate in terms of his age; his mother's answers to the question he asks are accurate and presented in an age-appropriate manner for a four year old. When told about the death, Tommy asks, "What's 'died'?" His question indicates that four year olds have a limited perception of the concept of death (Nagy; Anthony; Gesell, Ilg and Ames).

Tommy's mother's response, "Died means that Nana Upstairs won't be here any more." is an appropriate one for a child of four in that it adds to his intellectual resources. A four year old generally believes death to be reversible; Tommy's mother's response provides information which will be useful in helping him realize that death is not reversible...slow though this realization may be in coming.

Tommy goes upstairs to the bedroom and sees that the bed is empty. He cries then asks his mother, "Won't she ever come back?" unwilling to let go the possible reversibility of death. "No, Dear, except in your memory. She will come back in your memory whenever you think about her," his mother responds. Once more she has added to the child's intellectual resources. She gently re-affirms that death is not reversible and describes a process, remembering a dead person, which will become more

and more of a reality as the child develops. She is providing Tommy with information, accurate information, which will become increasingly useful to him.

The story continues with Tommy waking up one night and seeing a falling star, after which he rushes to his mother's bedroom. She explains to him that "Perhaps that was a kiss from Nana Upstairs." This statement is neither accurate nor appropriate. It is inaccurate in that the dead do not send back kisses. It is inappropriate in that it would probably confuse a four year old. The last scene in the book shows Tommy as an adolescent looking at another falling star soon after the death of Nana Downstairs and thinking to himself, "Now you are both Nana Upstairs." This addition, too, would add nothing to the understanding of a four year old, but would probably confuse him/her. These sections of the book would best be omitted when the book is used with a young child.

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of a child being o.k. in feeling as he does about death; of a child being taken care of after a death exposure. Tommy cries, wonders, asks questions and misses one who dies; he is tenderly cared for throughout. Before the death of Nana Upstairs the young reader knows that Tommy has a loving family within which he is cooked for, touched, talked to, read to, given candy mints. After her death these things go on: Tommy is held on his mother's lap and held close with her arm around him as she explains death to him.

3. Social Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of death being a shared experience. Through physical contact with his mother and conversation with her about death, Tommy shares the death of Nana Upstairs. As Nana Downstairs becomes "just plain Nana" after the death of the great-grandmother, the young reader is left with the feeling that the death and continued life experiences are shared between Tommy and his Nana.

The Dead Bird
Margaret Wise Brown
Addison-Wesley
Reading, Massachusetts, 1938 & 1965
Suggested Age Range: 5-7 years

This is the story of a group of children which appear to be between five and seven years of age. They find a dead bird and proceed to examine it, then plan and implement a funeral. They continue to visit the grave daily "until they forgot".

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an age-appropriate manner. The children's reactions to the dead bird are accurate in terms of their age range and appropriately presented for the young reader. The children feel the bird and notice that its body is, at first, warm and limp, then becomes cold and stiff. They also notice that it doesn't move, that its heart isn't beating.

> ...it had not been dead for long---it
> was still warm and its eyes were closed.

> The children felt with their fingers for the quick beat of the bird's heart in its breast. But there was no heart beating. That was how they knew it was dead.

The characters evidence a preoccupation with ritual typical of their age as they plan and carry out burial procedures; they indicate, also the beginning of emotional response in feeling sad that the bird died; yet, seem not to connect the bird's death to their own eventual death (Nagy; Anthony; Gesell, Ilg and Ames). The young reader will also identify with the importance of the peer group as plans are made and carried forth.

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of children being o.k. in feeling as they do about death; of children being taken care of after a death exposure. The children's emotional reaction to the dead bird is to feel "very sorry the bird was dead and could never fly again". They were also "glad they had found it, because now they could dig a grave in the woods and bury it". Later they sing to the bird every day and put fresh flowers on his grave..."until they forgot for go on playing ball. The peer group, in feeling so, provide a model for the reader that sadness over death, perhaps gladness to have cause for ritual, and even forgetfulness when they become involved in play are all o.k. Indication that the characters are taken care of by adults after a death exposure is omitted from this book (unless one assumes that adults grant permission for the ritual

and the materials necessary for it). The children are taken care of after their death exposure within the peer group.

3. Social Needs and Resources

In that a group of children share a death exposure, feelings about death, the planning and implementation of a funeral, play--- the characters of this story provide a model of death being a shared experience. There is no indication in this book, however, that death is a shared experience with adults.

My Grandson Lew
Charlotte Solotow
Harper and Row
New York, 1974
Suggested Age Range: 6-8 years

This is the story of Lewis, a six year old, who remembers, with the help of his mother, his grandfather who died four years previous.

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

This story does not provide an model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an age-appropriate manner. The child in the story, at six, is able to remember details of a relationship with his grandfather which ended when the child was two. It seems unlikely that this would be possible for a child to accomplish when there is no indication of promting over the years (the mother shows surprise at Lewis' memory).

In addition, the mother adds a difficult statement: "You made him (the grandfather) come back for me tonight." She means it figuratively, of course, but a child between six and eight years of age would probably interpret such a statement literally.

Such a statement coupled with the book's illustrations would undoubtedly confuse a child and cause him trouble in discerning whether or not the grandfather is dead or alive. The grandfather is pictured in all remembered activities which make him seem not dead and part of the past, but very much alive and part of the present.

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

The characters in this story provide a model of a child being o.k. to feel as he does about death; of a child being taken care of after a death exposure. Lewis and his mother share memories of grandfather and both seem to feel comforted by them. Lewis is being taken care of as his mother listens to him and sits with her arm around him.

In another way, however, the book provides an inadequate emotional model: it is potentially scary. Lewis talks of his grandfather standing at the end of his bed staring at him:

> 'I remember his eyes...He gave me eye-hugs nights like this when I woke up and called.'

This is a memory, but it would be easy for a child to think that dead people return and stare at one during the night from the end of the bed. The illustration of the grandfather actually doing so...with bulging eyes...adds further to the scary nature of this event.

3. Social Needs and Resources

While it would seem that Lew and his mother have not shared

memories of the grandfather in the four years since he died, the characters in this story do reach the point of being able to share their death exposure providing a model of death being a shared experience.

> '...now we will remember him together and neither of us will be so lonely as we would be if we had to remember him alone.'

A Taste of Blackberries
Doris Buchanan Smith
Thomas Y. Crowell Company
New York, 1973
Suggested Age Range: 8-10 years

This is the story of a ten year old boy as he copes with the sudden death of his friend, Jamie.

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an age-appropriate manner. The boy is told, "Jamie is dead, Darling." by his mother; the funeral is described equally clearly: what Jamie looked like, what people said and did.

> 'There were people all around, talking in whispers, or not talking. Some were crying. I leaned my back against the door frame, thinking of Jamie' (p. 34).

The boy faced the death squarely:

> 'There was Jamie. He was out straight with one hand crossed over his chest. He didn't look like he was asleep to me. Jamie slept all bunched up. Jamie looked dead' (p. 36).

Even Martha, Jamie's younger sister, reinforces the idea that death is, indeed, irreversible:

> 'Jamie's dead,' she said. 'Like that baby bird you and Jamie found and tried to ffed but he died anyway. Jamie's not coming home again. Not never (p. 45).

The boy's mother explains how Jamie could have died from a bee sting.

> 'It wasn't the number of stings, it was that Jamie was allergic to them. A few people are allergic to bee stings' (p. 28).

The boy's reaction to the burial offers additional accurate information about a ten year old's reaction to death.

> 'There was the hole. Jamie's hole. It was oblong and nice and even around the edges...The man with the blue stripes in his tie stood near the grave with his Bible and said some more things...(p. 51).

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of children being o.k. to feel as they do about death; of children being taken care of after a death exposure. While there is information that Jamie's younger siblings are being taken care of by mother and neighbors, the focus of the story is on the boy, Jamie's friend. His emotional reaction to the death seems to follow closely the stages of reacting to death described by Kubler-Ross (1969). The boy tries to deny the death: "...Nobody dies of bee stings." (p. 23) When his mother told him about Jamie's death, he "didn't want to listen to her telling me lies about Jamie." (p. 27) He felt that if he acted like Jamie wasn't

dead, he wouldn't be (p. 32) and that it must all be a dream and "we would all wake up any minute and there would be Jamie clowning around and making us laugh." (p. 46)

He felt anger that he and Jamie would not be able to have blink contests anymore (p. 36), he even tore a flower to shreds. (p. 36) He tried to bargain Jamie back. "I would rub life back for Jamie. if I did certain things...everything would be all right and it wouldn't be true that Jamie was dead." (p. 46) He felt depressed and spent time just sitting and thinking. Eventually, he accepted the death:

> 'At supper I no longer felt it was disloyal to eat. If a miracle would have brought Jamie back it would have been done already' (p. 52).
>
> '...I felt that Jamie, too, was glad the main sadness was over...'(p. 58).

Throughout the story it is evident that the adults consider the boy's feelings as o.k. and that he is being taken care of: by his mother who talks with him often about the death, by his father who "...called to me and grabbed my shoulder and turned me around" (p. 36) so that the boy could bury his head in the father's chest; by a neighbor who allowed him to sit in her garden, the "most private place" (p. 39) he knew; and by Jamie's mother who "...touched my cheek and leaned down and kissed me on the forehead...'You be sure to come slam the door for me now and then.'" (p. 56)

3. Social Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of death being a shared experience. The boy shares Jamie's death with the adults

surrounding him, with Jamie's younger sister, with peers, and even with Jamie in the sense that he continues to have monologues with him.

By the Highway Home
Mary Stolz
Harper and Row
New York, 1971
Suggested Age Range: 9-12 years

This is the story of a thirteen year old girl, Catty, and her family after they receive news that her older brother has been killed in Vietnam.

1. Intellectual Needs and Resources

The characters of this story provide a model of accurate information about death and reactions to death presented in an appropriate manner for nine through twelve year olds. Catty's perceptions of death are similar to those of an adult: death is an irreversible end to life as she knows it. "...she knew that he was dead, and those were the worst times of all." (p. 19) The characters react to the brother's death differently and such variety seems an accurate diversity: Catty wants to talk about Beau; the others seem not to want to:

'Can't I ever talk about him?'

'Not yet. Some day. Not now.' (p. 21)

Catty's younger brother "talks as if Beau had gone around the corner foe an hour (p. 25). Catty's parents are cross, distracted burdened. It is with these differing family reactions that Catty must deal.

2. Emotional Needs and Resources

At first, the characters do not provide a model of children

being o.k. to feel as they do about death; of children being taken care of after a death exposure. Catty expressed her emotions. the reader is aware of them, but she is dealt with by her family shortly, as if she is an irritation. It is only when Catty's emotion bursts forth that she is finally dealt with in a supportive manner and the family can recognize, as the reader already has, that Catty is o.k. Catty cried with her arms around her father's waist. It is Catty's mother who asks, "Catty, Darling, what;s wrong?"

> Why was she crying, so that her throat and chest felt lumpy and breathing seemed to choke her?
>
> 'Nobody---nobody is happy anymore,' she said finally, gasping. 'It's all so bad, since Beau---' she broke off, folded her lips, then shrieked, "Nobody lets me talk about Beau!' (p. 24)

Catty's mother put her arms around Catty, who continued to cry for a long time. When Catty became quiet, it was her father who said,

> 'I guess we've been wrong...I guess we thought that if---if you children were given time---it we didn't refer to him too often---I don't know what we thought. Not that you'd forget, Catty. Just, perhaps that you'd have time to heal. If we talk about him all the time---'
>
> 'Not all the time...I only want you and Mom, and even Virginia, to act sometimes as if you remembered him!' (p. 25)

The book, thus, provides a model of a family which cannot be immediately supportive, which doesn't give immediately feedback to Catty that she is o.k., but which is startled out of their misery to offer the support which Catty desperately needs. As such, the characters provide a model of growing toward accepting

a child as o.k. to feel as she does, a model of growing toward taking care of a child's emotional needs.

3. Social Needs and Resources

While, at first, Catty seems alone as she copes with her brother's death, the characters of this story grow toward being able to share the death experience. The family members become more supportive of each other as they talk about Beau, his death, and their new life together.

Bibliotherapy is a powerful tool for helping children cope with direct and indirect death exposures. Through the process of bibliotherapy, the reader is enabled to identify with another whose experience is similar, to feel emotional release as a result of this identification, and to gain insight into his/her own experience. For this process to be helpful, it is crucial that any book selected to facilitate the process be carefully evaluated to determine whether its content will contribute to the child's immediate intellectual, emotional, and social needs; and to the building of intellectual, emotional, and social resources so that the child will grow toward independence rather than total dependence, strength rather than helplessness, as he/she copes with death exposures.

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